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Yazoo Pump: Whose homes here are flooding?

RAY MOSSBY & NATALIE PERKINS

Editor's Note: This is the second in a four-part series examining the role of Sharkey and Issaquena counties within the context of the South Delta's most controversial flood control project.

"Year after year, these people who live in this area are threatened with floods, at are their homes and businesses and hospitals. It's a very dangerous situation."—U.S. Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.) on the floor of the U.S. Senate during a debate on funding for the Yazoo Backwater Pump, Jan. 23, 2003.

ROLLING FORK—Are people really personally threatened, do they face danger on a regular basis from backwater flooding?

Somewhere, perhaps, but not Sharkey and Issaquena counties. That's the finding of an investigation by the Beer Creek Pilot of the lowest-lying areas of the two counties, and that's the admission of one of the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project's most vocal proponents.

For many years, the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project has been argued and advertised as an agricultural enhancement one. But recently that changed—most notably in respective speeches by Mississippi's two U.S. senators trying to beat back an attempt to remove project funding from the federal budget. The Corps of Engineers' plan to build a 14,000 cubic-foot-per-second pumping plant in southern Issaquena County has now apparently morphed into an effort to protect South Delta homes from flooding. "The pump actually will protect 1,000 homes. I think the most important thing is the human side of this. Year after year—and it is almost every year—that people have water in their homes," Lott said.

Similarly, in a half-page advertisement in The Clarion-Ledger Feb. 3, the Mississippi Levee Board touted the project as one to "keep a child safe from the hazards of floodwaters," and said it would "solve many of the problems that families who inhabit over 1,000 homes in the area face during high water events."

So where are these threatened South Deltaans and their 1,000 regularly flooding homes?

The Beer Creek Pilot examined the tax rolls of the two counties—220,201.58 acres, lying south of a line just beneath the southern town limits of Cary—the local land most frequently susceptible to routine backwater flooding events. (See graphic on Page 2.) That area also represents a significant portion of the two-year frequency flood plain, where the Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has concluded only one "structure" is subject to flooding. (Within the Cary town limits the Corps says only two houses would be affected by a 100-year flood.)

The tax rolls for that area indicate 196 occupied flood residential dwellings, 124 of which are owner-occupied. These totals do not include mobile homes, which, by definition, can be more easily moved in the event of pre-flood flooding.

According to The Stennis Institute of Government at Mississippi State University, which served as the redistricting consultant for the two counties after the 2000 Census, approximately 425-450 men, women and children are currently residing in Sharkey and Issaquena counties south of the Cary line—or about 2.4 individuals per occupied flood dwelling.

So how many of them flood

on any kind of recurring basis?

According to Mississippi Emergency Management Agency records: • In the 24-year period from 1978-2002, 151 federal flood insurance program losses were reported in Sharkey County—an average of 6.28 per year.

• In the 24-year period from 1978-2002, 645 federal flood insurance program losses were reported in Issaquena County—an average of 26.8 per year.

The state agency records do not reflect how many of those reported losses were to homes.

And while not all residents in the area can be assumed to participate in the flood insurance program, the statistically average year of 37.47 flood insurance claims in the lowest areas of the two counties making up more than half of the Corps pump project area would hardly seem to support the claim of up to 1,000 homes flooding every year.

But what about first-hand accounts? Personal anecdotal evidence?

Both Lott and U.S. Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) in their Jan. 23 Senate speeches, referenced a week earlier visit from a "delegation" of five African-American South Delta residents, led by Ruby Johnson of Cary, which supported the pump.

Johnson, along with Clinton Porter of Pilot, serve as co-chairmen of the South Delta Flood Control Committee, a local area pro-pump group organized by two of the project's strongest proponents, the Delta Council and the Mississippi Levee Board.

"They told us stories about having to put their children in boats to save them to school when the water is rising. They told us of fleeing snakes, which find their way into their homes after the water recedes," Lott told his fellow senators.

But how contemporary are those stories?

Contacted Feb. 18 at her home, located on high ground above Beer Creek in Cary, Johnson said she is personally unaware of any Sharkey or Issaquena county family which actually must deal with floodwaters in its home today.

"To be honest with you," Johnson said, "I know of one or two who have to leave because of the water, but I can't actually say of anyone who gets water in their house. When the water comes up to the houses, they move out. I don't know of one that gets water in their home."

Johnson, who said she moved back to Sharkey County from Chicago in 1995, said the last "heard stories from my family about how bad it used to be."

When asked if she had learned through her South Delta Flood Control Committee role of occupied homes flooding within the last 20 years—since the completion of the Backwater Levee in 1980—Johnson said, "that project helped a lot. It doesn't get as bad."

Elaborating that evaluation was Linda Whitmore, the U.S. Postal Service rural mail carrier, whose route has been the lower part of Sharkey and Issaquena counties for the past 18 years. Whitmore said that while some dwellings on her two-county rural mail route used to be periodically affected by backwater flooding, she knows of no one which is today.

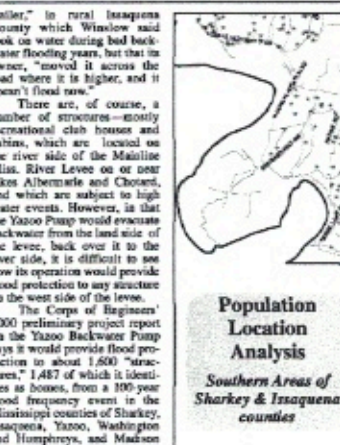
Whitmore said the residents two then occupied homes which in previous years were subject to flooding, "in the really bad years," but that both are "vacant today."

There used to be one

Not so much any more

The sights of South Delta homes flooded and others threatened, like these during the flood of 1973, were once common. However, the construction of water control structures and the completion of the Backwater Levee in 1980 have greatly reduced residential flooding here.

—Pilot file photos



Population Location Analysis
Southern Areas of Sharkey & Issaquena counties

On Jan. 23, the U.S. Senate voted 67-30 to approve \$10 million in funding for the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project. How many of its members, in so doing, believed they were protecting women and children from the dangers of constant flooding in Sharkey and Issaquena counties?

Next week: Who owns the land in the pump?